

Troubled Waters by orphan_account

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Billy as a redeemable character over time, Like really slow, M/M, Slow Burn, Steve the good babysitter, Steve's a cop now, The Upside Down is back once again and it's Steve's problem, except the kids are all grown up now, i can't write anything without a plot that could be a film trilogy, if you know what i mean, more tags to be added with each chapter, not to mention Billy, oh boy oh boy is Steve in for some bad days here, settle in kids it's gonna get bumpy, they're going to go through some stuff

Language: English

Characters: Billy Hargrove, Dustin Henderson, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Steve Harrington

Relationships: Billy Hargrove & Steve Harrington, Billy Hargrove/Steve Harrington, Steve Harrington/Jim "Chief" Hopper

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2017-11-23

Updated: 2017-12-14

Packaged: 2022-04-03 14:48:04

Rating: Mature

Warnings: Graphic Depictions Of Violence

Chapters: 5

Words: 19,576

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

It's 1989 and Steve Harrington works under Jim Hopper at the Hawkins Police Department. After five years of relative peace and quiet, it's about to become very apparent that the Upside Down is not done with the citizens of Hawkins just yet.

Steve thinks attending the scene of a murder might be the worst thing he's ever had to do, but things are about to get so much worse... and right in the eye of the storm is the last person Steve Harrington ever wanted to speak to again: Billy Hargrove.

1. Big Trouble in Little Hawkins

Author's Note:

Steve becoming a cop is an idea Zer0Bee and I haven't been able to shake, so we're writing this together (because we all know I fall off the writing bandwagon when I do it alone).

Primarily a Harringrove fanfiction, but it's also all about the plot here. Because we can't do things by halves. Hope you enjoy it! Chapter two is almost ready to post too.

Hawkins, 1989

Austin Jones pulled his truck into the dirt parking lot of Hawkins Express Auto Repair Centre at 9am on the dot and he couldn't have been in a better mood. It was an overcast day but the sun was shining behind the clouds, the air crisp with the first chill of September and he'd come to tell Mr. Richards that he was happy to accept his offer of a promotion to assistant manager of the joint.

The auto centre sat a little ways out of town, about half a mile down Cornwallis on the edge of the forest. It was a peaceful spot; the sun streamed through the trees and bounced off the tin roof of the workshop, the sort of pale pink light that only came with fall mornings, and there were birds singing a quiet chorus in the woods beyond the building. Austin stepped inside the shop, the little bell chirping above the door to welcome him. He was unbothered by the fact the door isn't locked at this hour - Richards was a hard worker and must have gotten started early that day, the man's car already in the parking lot in its usual space.

He called out to the old man, noticing the light off and door locked on the manager's office. Stranger still, the power seemed to be out. Curiously he explored further, past the reception desk and waiting area and into the workshop at the back. It was dark as hell in there without the overheads, and Austin suddenly felt a little more uncomfortable in the dark as his eyes scanned over the dark shapes of

the cars and tool benches that seemed to take on a life of their own in the dark.

"Greg, are you in here?"

With an electrical buzz, the lights sprung back to life, making him jump a little. Berating himself silently for getting scared, Austin tried to ignore how his heart hammered against his chest. Calling out again, still to no answer, he ran his hands through his hair. Maybe Richards had stepped out for some reason.

Besides one of the cars, he could see what looked like an oil leak pooling out onto the concrete floor. He quirked a brow, moving closer. It's not oil. Austin's throat went dry at the sight, heartbeat seeming to stop dead for a moment as he looked on at the visceral mess on the floor.

Oh god. His breathing stammered in his chest as he looked around himself like there might still be something in there with him, feet rooted to the spot. Poor Greg. His hands trembled, cold sweat breaking out on his forehead. Fighting the urge to vomit, Austin ran for the phone like his life depended on it.

It was already nearly ten by the time Hopper finally made it into the office. He'd spent a rare night alone without Jane - she was eighteen now and there was no stopping her from going out whether he liked it or not - and he was slightly hungover and grouchy from waiting up until after midnight for her to get home. She never appreciated it, and he'd been met as ever with an argument about how she could protect herself and didn't need him worrying over her. He massaged his temples as he strolled down the corridor towards his office, hoping he could steal a few minutes rest before starting the day.

No such luck.

"Morning Flo, trust you had a nice evening," he said with a defeated sigh and a half-smile as she came marching out of the main office.

"No time for chit chat I'm afraid, Jim." She gave him a look - one of

those looks, where he knew it was serious without being told - and handed him a note. He took it without breaking eye contact with her, trying to read her face for any more information before glancing down at it. Fuck, he wished he hadn't.

"Right."

Why did things like this only ever seem to happen on hangover mornings?

As Hopper marched into the main office, Steve Harrington was staring at the keyboard in front of him, mulling over the night before. He'd been a deputy with the Hawkins Police Station for a little under two years now - two quiet, uneventful years where the most exciting thing he'd worked on was setting up a police blockade for a car chase making its way towards them from Michigan City, only for the car chase to swerve East and skip out on Hawkins all together. Probably for the better. He enjoyed working under Jim Hopper, his respect for the man only growing year after year, and more than anything he appreciated not working for his father anymore. He'd only had to endure a couple of years of that before Hopper had offered him a role at the station, and he'd graduated training two weeks after his twenty-first birthday with better results than he'd ever achieved in school.

He'd become a cop in hopes of making a better life for himself, but there was more to it than that. For what it was worth, he wanted to help people. Protect people. He was good at that, after all. If Hawkins was quiet, they were doing their jobs right.

But last night was strange. Disconcerting, even. It had gone one a.m. before he'd gotten home, most of the evening spent attending to a call from Mrs. Jessop's farm on the edge of town. Her voice on the phone had been frazzled as she'd told him there was something in the woods next to her house, something stalking her. He'd headed over there fast but found the woods quiet when he arrived; there was no sense of anything there and no unusual sounds.

"Probably just" a 'coon or something giving her the spooks," Powell

had offered with a shrug, shining his torch into the dark trees. But it was the silence that really struck Steve, the silence that felt so cold and empty, so unlike the way those woods should have felt.

The pair of them had headed back to the house with Powell talking about how raccoons were wiley little bastard that always tried to break into his trash cans at night.

Something stalking her... the hairs had stood up on the back of Steve's neck, stopping him in his tracks and making him turn back to the woods. His eyes narrowed, trying to see through the thick undergrowth. It felt suddenly as though there was something watching them, something unseen but very close. His heart rate rose a little as he peered along the beam of his torch. Was that movement? There was nothing there, no eyes glinting, just darkness and stillness and -

"Harrington-" The deep voice sliced through Steve's thoughts, bringing him back to the station and away from the dread he'd felt last night at those woods. Hopper was stood at the end of his desk, brow furrowed as though he'd called Steve's name a few times without the him hearing it. "You're with me."

Steve fumbled an apology but Hopper was already turning on his heel and heading for the door. He switched off his new computer, pleased not to be struggling with the technology for another minute that morning, and hurried to his feet, grabbing his uniform jacket from the back of his chair as he followed.

The pair didn't speak until they reached Hopper's patrol car, Steve slipping into the passenger seat and strapping in. The radio came roaring to life with the engine, but Jim quickly switched it off and put them both in silence once again. He looked lost in his thoughts as he pulled the car out of the lot and the expression worried Steve.

"What's the call?"

"Murder, kiddo," Jim said with a grimace. He knew most people in Hawkins but he'd known Greg Richards since back in middle school. They'd never been proper friends, but he'd fixed Jim's car up for him for free the week before he'd headed into the big city when he'd first

started as a cop, and been a friendly face when he'd finally returned to Hawkins some years later. They'd shared a few drinks and rounds of cards in their time. One of the worst parts of living in a small town was the deaths. Everyone knew everyone. Every death was personal tragedy. At least Richards had no surviving family to miss him... although that was more of a mess for other reasons. "At least it sounds like it. Greg Richards was found dead in his workshop this morning. Think you're ready for your first big case?"

A small huff of air left the young cop in surprise at the name and Hopper felt bad for him. Steve sunk down into his seat and shook his head. The thought that murder could be a possibility in this town was still as surprising now as it would've been before the incident with the lab years ago. That had been outside forces. Murder suggested someone they might know could be involved.

Hopper said he'd been great for the department so far, whipping Powell and Callahan into better shape and serving as someone - the only person in their department - that Hopper could unwind to about what had happened at the lab and about his daughter's so-called superpowers (although he knew Jim liked to think of them more as nuisances). There'd been less reason to talk about it as time had passed, but they still appreciated each other's company. They shared a solidarity in their experiences, and over time, a strong friendship.

Steve liked to joke that it was because he was the only person Hopper could ever trust to babysit Jane.

"It's going to be gruesome to look at. Always is. I know you can handle it, though," Hopper continued when he didn't speak up. "Everything you've seen and all."

"Were you ready for yours?" Steve asked the chief, his dark eyes watching the older man. Demodogs were one thing but this would be something else entirely. He'd been relatively lucky with his encounters with the Upside Down - besides the imminent threat of death hot on his heels both years, he'd never seen what those creatures could do to a person first-hand. Never had to clean up that mess. The whole debacle had given him more nightmares than useful experience in his eyes, even if Jim didn't think so. He wouldn't let him down now.

"Of course not," Hopper admitted truthfully. "But the first dead body I saw was one I made. The military does that to you."

Steve paled at his words, turning to look out the window. At least he'd never had to serve in the war.

"It's alright to be freaked, kiddo," Hopper added, trying to be more comforting than he sounded.

He took a long breath to calm his nerves, the thought of seeing someone dead leaving a sour taste in his mouth. "Who found the body? We're gonna be the first to attend, right?"

"One of the engineers, I think his name's Austin? Young guy, bit older than you perhaps." Hopper didn't know much more on the subject. "Said the body was... 'mauled'. But before you ask - I did - it's apparently not an animal attack. Happened inside the workshop, door on the latch. Someone let themselves in and closed the door afterwards."

It was a horrible thought, that someone in Hawkins could have torn a guy apart, but that was that. It had happened; now they had to deal with it. Steve gave an involuntary shiver at the thought. An uneasy weight settled in his stomach as they pulled up to the garage, onto the dusty forecourt.

You can do this, you can do this...

Steve took a breath and slipped out of the patrol car. There was a man stood outside the entrance to the building, looking pale and in shock as he looked towards the two police men approaching. Must be Austin. A sigh of relief escaped the guy as he pushed away from the wall and crossed to meet them.

"I'm glad you're here." Austin's voice was calmer then he looked, his tone even as he reached to shake Hopper's hand. The ordinary gesture threw Steve off somewhat as his own hand was also taken by the dark haired man and shaken. "He's uh...Fuck."

Voice cracking a little, Austin gestured towards the doorway, unable to finish his sentence for a moment.

"Has anyone else been here yet?" Steve asked, pulling his notebook from his shirt pocket and jotting down their time of arrival. Austin shook his head, eyes still staring off towards the garage itself for a moment before stumbling over his words and turning to face Steve and Hopper properly again.

"No, no one else but me has been here this morning."

"How's security on this joint?"

Hopper must have realised his opening question wasn't the most comforting thing that could have come out of his mouth, as he patted the man on the shoulder in an awkward gesture of reassurance and gestured up at camera visible above the front door to confirm what he meant.

"Uh, oh," Austin stammered, as though that hadn't even crossed his mind yet. He was losing his cool quickly. "No cameras inside the building, it's just a small place you know? But that one works. Runs a twenty four hour tape then records over itself."

It wasn't a great start but at least it was a start. Steve added it to his notebook underneath the rest of Austin's answers so far. It was understandable how shaken he was; Steve had no doubts he would probably be this upset - if not more so - if he'd discovered a friend dead. It didn't bear thinking about.

"Good enough," Hopper nodded and motioned at Steve to make note of that. "Unless you've got anything else to say, we'll take a look inside now."

Austin shook his head, asking if they minded if he stay outside the workshop. Hopper agreed with a dismissive wave and headed in through the front door to the reception, which held a visitors desk and one other smaller desk with stacks of papers and filing trays. The future had not reached the auto centre yet, it seemed. Behind this desk was the door to an office, and to the other side of the room were three waiting room chairs and the door to the workshop.

"Let's check the body, then I want you on that security footage alright? Gary won't be over until midday at least so we can't do much

with Greg until then."

Surveying the entrance, he wouldn't have had any idea that there was anything out of the ordinary there. It looked and felt exactly how Steve remembered it from his last visit three years ago, when Greg and his team had fixed up his car for him. If he didn't already know the gruesome scene that waited for them, he'd have no idea anything foul had happened here. That was disconcerting in itself.

"Yeah...Sure." Steve replied quietly, eyeing the door to the office and biting back his request to go straight there on his own and avoid the body. There was no way he could anyway; he needed to do his job and didn't want to let Hop down on his first major crime case. "Let's do what we can for him then until he gets here, right?"

It was a strange feeling, to be the first responders to a local crime. It was probably going to shake Hawkins to the core, much like the disappearance of Will Byers six years earlier. The citizens of Hawkins were lucky to be barely scraping the surface of everything that had happened in their small town.

Nodding towards the workshop door, Steve gave Hopper a nervous glance. "After you."

Hopper gave him what looked like it was trying to be an encouraging smile before stepping through into the workshop. The lights flickered slightly; Jim eyed them warily, and looked around the room, frowning at the dull and normal scene before him. Three cars in the shop, one raised up on the lift, tools still in place. Just as though nothing had happened. The last murder (well, suicide, but he didn't believe that) he'd investigated had been his friend Benny and the scene had been much the same - nothing out of the ordinary besides the body.

However, as he rounded the last car to where the body lay, it was a different story entirely.

"Awh, Jesus," Hopper muttered. Steve followed tentatively behind his partner as they entered the garage, the smell of copper almost hidden behind that of engine oil and burning rubber. Crossing the room and passing the cars, the younger man's heart beat kicked into overdrive,

his hand clutching his notebook tighter with every step.

Richards wasn't just mauled - he appeared to be missing pieces. He was mutilated. The blood spatter spread right across the workshop, with what appeared to be flecks of flesh among it. The station would have jumped straight on 'animal attack' had they not already been told otherwise - plus there were tools all over the place, one large crowbar right beside Richards' head covered in a slick substance they had to assume was blood. A whole cabinet had been knocked over too, paint, oil and car parts strewn everywhere.

"Signs of a struggle," Hopper noted aloud. He felt terrible for Harrington; if it was possible, this had to be the worst first murder case to walk in on. "Potential murder weapon too. Hey, Harrington - don't stare at it, okay?"

It was too late.

"Jesus Christ."

Blood. Dark eyes widened in horror at the scene before them, barely able to recognise the shape before them as a person. Hopper's words fell on deaf ears as Steve processed what was before him, bile rising in his throat and his stomach doing cartwheels. Blood splatters, sticky residue, lumps of..meat strewn around the corpse... Steve clapped his hand to his mouth, his eyes shutting defensively as he willed himself not to throw up.

Greg had been butchered, completely massacred to a point that he was barely recognisable. Taking a shaky breath, Steve swallowed the bile and turned to face away, a slight shake to his stance as a wave of nausea swept through him.

"Sorry, I - uh - I missed that..?" Holding his notebook out again and straightening the now crumpled pages to take more notes for the Hopper, trying to focus on that instead. "Signs of a struggle and a murder w...weapon, right?"

His stomach lurched at the thought of what sort of weapon could be used to cause such brutal destruction to a person. What the hell kind of person could do something like that? He closed his eyes to calm

himself, only to flinch out of it in panic as Hopper's hand came to rest on his shoulder.

"Deep breath. Don't stare at it. You've got to step out of the scene or you'll lose your head. Look at it scientifically."

"Science wasn't a strong point..." Steve mumbled in response, grimacing to himself as he followed Hopper's advice. Deep breath in, 2, 3, and deep breath out, 2, 3...

Hopper pulled on a pair of rubber gloves from his pocket, followed by the station's new Kodak digicam. The fact cameras could be pocket sized now was still amazing to all of them.

"I was saying, this crowbar over here looks like it could be the murder weapon." Hopper repeated.

He snapped a few photographs of the scene before they touched anything. Steve turned back to the body with a final deep breath and started noting down what Hopper was saying to him, a frown creasing his face as he gestured down to the massacre dumbly. "You think someone did this with a crowbar? Christ..."

"Looking at it, could be more than one weapon." Hopper shrugged hopelessly. "Could be anything. Got to be honest, kid - this is probably the most violent murder scene I've ever seen. Got to be a crime of passion. Someone with a serious cruel streak... and strong."

There was nothing to compare it to for Steve, no basis for him to say the difference between a crowbar wound and... not a crowbar wound but this was just... It felt insane that someone could do this. 'Passion' or not. The corpse looked as though something had made a meal out of it.

"Why's animal attack been ruled out again...?" Turning back to face the entrance, Steve narrowed his eyes thoughtfully. "Someone could have brought one in and taken it out again, maybe."

"Maybe," Hopper agreed half-heartedly. The crowbar was definitely bloodied with something, although crouching by it to take pictures, he wasn't as sure as he had been that it'd been stuck in Mr. Richards.

Both reassuring and worrying. The idea of 'wild animal as murder weapon' as Steve was suggesting was a bit out there, but he'd seen weirder working in the city before he'd come back to Hawkins. But what else would be on it? It wasn't oil. Looking up at Steve again, he paused for a moment before extending an olive branch. "You can go check out those tapes if you want. I can comb this area on my own, take pictures and so on."

Steve nodded gratefully - he would take that excuse to leave this room with no questions asked.

"Let's hope there's something on there."

"Go on," Hopper said with a look that gave Steve a little more confidence in himself. "Be thorough about it."

With an attempt of a smile at Hop to cover the nausea again, Steve turned and headed towards the office.

The weight in his stomach felt heavier.

Austin was out in the reception area ringing his hands as Steve came out.

"Ah, officer," he said quietly, looking relieved to see Steve again. "Here's the office keys, thought you might want...."

He trailed off, holding the keys out for Steve. Looking a little sheepish, he stammered on. He was shaking as he spoke, the self blame striking a chord in Steve. He crossed over to the other man and took the keys from his hand.

"Also...I thought of something, and Hop said... well. Mr. Richards had... Greg had just offered me Assistant Manager. I think some of the guys weren't that happy with the decision. I can't really imagine they'd-- but--" Austin faltered, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "There was some arguin' in the office when I clocked out last night. Dunno who. Just kept my head down and went home. If I hadn't.... maybe...."

"Hey, don't do that to yourself - okay?" Steve's voice was low and soft, understanding how awful this must feel. God knows Steve had a habit

of blaming himself. "There's nothing you could've done, if you'd've stayed last night..."

The words trailed, an unspoken 'you could be in that room too' left in the air between them for a moment before Steve gave a small sigh and squeezed Austin's shoulder. "Thank you for that information, I'll let Hopper know. Why don't you just show me how to work your camera system and then you can head home, alright? If you think of anything then you can give us a call."

The man looked defeated, like he was ready to break down at any moment with the touch to his shoulder. Nodding silently and he turned and let Steve pass him to the office door. The young man made to move but paused before passing him, giving an encouraging smile. "We will catch the person who did this."

It was a promise Steve intended on keeping. It seemed to do the job and Austin followed him to the office.

It didn't take too much explaining - the camera system was relatively old at this point, just a few buttons here and there. The mechanic seemed to be in another world as he talked Steve through the controls quietly. A few minutes later, he gave a mumbled 'see ya' before heading out the door.

Steve heaved a sigh, sitting back in the chair and staring at the ceiling for a moment. Poor guy. It must've been horrific to find that body this morning. And blaming himself... Fuck. He knew he'd be the same.

Back to it, Harrington. This wasn't the time to be self-reflecting.

Clicking through the tape, he fast forwarded through any empty spots, stopping and playing the footage whenever there was movement. He made a note that he'd need to make a copy if there was anything worthwhile on there - or probably make one anyway - before the tape erased itself and started on the next twenty-four hour recording cycle.

It was slow going, watching cars come and go the day before. Business looked good; not thriving, but nowhere in Hawkins was ever booming. There was Greg, smiling and laughing on the forecourt with Austin at 2pm. Steve paused the video, squeezing the bridge of his nose as his stomach churned again, trying to detach that smiling face from the disfigured one in the other room.

Hitting fast forward again, the he watched the figures moving around heading back into the building as another car rolled up.

A car he recognised.

Sitting up straight in his seat, Steve clicked the play button just as Billy Hargrove stepped out of his muscle car and looked around the empty area, slamming the door behind him as he lit a cigarette up with his other hand and headed in to the building. A few minutes later, Austin emerged and got into his own car, pulling out of the car park and heading off into the night.

No fucking way.

Steve watched the time tick past on the tape, getting later and later into the afternoon then - the screen cut to black. The surprise had him jumping out of his chair at the sudden change, but seconds later the picture returned. 40 minutes had passed and Billy's car was no longer outside.

Worrying his lip, Steve flicked through the remainder of the footage; nothing happened and no one else arrived or left until Austin rolled up at nine a.m. that morning, and the roll went dead as it caught up with the present.

Steve couldn't believe what he'd seen. In disbelief - just in case he somehow was seeing things wrong, just in case he didn't really recognise the other man after years of no contact - but on review there was no mistaking it. No mistaking that blue Camaro, and even in the poor quality CCTV footage, no mistaking the driver.

Billy fucking Hargrove was a suspect.

Well, shit.

2. Jagged Edge

Notes for the Chapter:

I know it's been like five hours but I can't stop and I won't stop, so here's chapter 2.

Hopper headed back to his vehicle and then back into the workshop, bringing a small box of evidence-collecting materials. His mind flashed back to Benny's death again as he worked; back in 1983, he would never have been this thorough - forensic science was as much science fiction back then as flying cars. Everything had changed in 1987 when DNA evidence had brought down a serial killer and freed a wrongly accused suspect who would have been found guilty without it - with this turning point in mind, Hopper now worked meticulously, bagging and tagging anything he thought might be relevant. On closer inspection, there was definitely blood on the crowbar as he suspected, whether human or animal, Greg's or someone else's. Only a lab could diagnose that - he had his suspicions but 'jumping to conclusions' wasn't part of the investigation game any longer. The blood curdled in a gross, sticky mixture with a visceral layer of something slimy he couldn't identify by sight alone. He tagged it 'Evidence A - potential murder weapon' and hoped forensics could do the rest.

He continued in this fashion, taking photographs and picking up whatever he could, although there wasn't much from the scene that screamed relevant no matter how much he combed over the mess. He noted that the radio was broken, still plugged in and untouched but unresponsive, and with the light still flickering above him, Hopper made a mental note to check for electrical faults later. The front door of the office was locked by key but the workshop rolling shutter was on a neat, fancy new electrical system. Perhaps the electricians had been tampered with to get inside.

Or perhaps the killer had simply had a key. They'd have to check the employee roster and look into every person who worked there.

After depositing the evidence back in his box, he took it into the reception area and slipped it behind the desk before joining Steve in

the office. Hopefully he'd managed to calm himself down after the initial horror of what they were working on.

"Anything useful, kiddo?"

Steve jumped - the second time that Hopper had caused him to do that already today - turning to look at the older man. "Come take a look."

Gesturing to the screen, he clicked the button to rewind it back to before Hargrove arrived, pausing the screen as Greg and Austin were making their way into the building.

"Austin told me he'd overheard arguing in the office as he left last night." He explained carefully, not wanting to believe what he'd seen, somewhat hoping Hopper would have some other explanation. Billy Hargrove was a bonafide ass, but the last he'd heard of the man he was trying to clean up his act. "He's just been, uh, promoted or something. Apparently some of the other guys aren't too happy about the choice."

Turning to the screen, he clicks the play button, Billy's car pulling up and in.

Austin leaves the building... time passes... The black spot is still there on his third viewing, the time jumps up once again and when it returns Billy's car is gone. Hitting pause again, Steve turns back to Hopper, eyebrows furrowed. "No one else comes or goes after that until Austin arrives this morning and calls us in."

He knows he doesn't need to explain what that could mean. Sighing and sitting back in his chair he eyes the screen warily. He knows Hopper is going to recognise the car too - it's practically unmistakable in their quiet town with its roaring beast of an engine and flashy electric blue paint job. Hargrove had been in the station cell overnight a few times since high school got out for fighting and driving under the influence, although never for anything that could pin him more permanently. Billy probably fit the profile for this crime, although Steve wouldn't call a few fist fights enough evidence to suggest someone had the capacity for murder. Even Billy, even after everything.

"I just don't get that cut out in the middle, you know. That's almost an hour lost - was there a power outage?"

"An argument, you said?" Hopper hummed, brushing over the black spot for a moment. He turned and picked through the papers on Greg Richards' desk until he finds something that catches his eye, flicking through the file. "Looks like Bill Hargrove works here. Fits the angry employee theory."

"Sure, maybe." Steve didn't want to think about Billy killing someone. He didn't want to think about anyone killing someone, but especially not someone he knew. Hopper's words - 'crime of passion' - turned over and over in his mind. He remembered the fire in Billy's eyes all too well.

"You're dead, Sinclair!"

"No, you are." Steve threw his fist furiously, smacking Billy Hargrove square in the jaw. No one got to get violent with a child. Not on his watch.

When Billy bounced back from the punch, wiping the blood away from his lips, he was laughing. His eyes were alight with the thrill of it, like he'd never wanted anything more than for Steve to punch him in the face. It was terrifying - those blue eyes were usually so dull and empty, but now the boy looked possessed in his excitement and Steve knew he was in trouble.

Finding Billy's employee record after a bit of digging through the mess, Hopper set it aside and turned back to the screen, taking over the rewind button and playing back over the blank spot in the tape.

"Killer could have cut the camera for the time, although it seems a little pointless when it only points out front. And that-" He tapped the paused screen, pointing at a white metal box next to the workshop shutter door. "-looks like the fuse box, so if someone had turned it off, we would have seen them at this moment before it goes black. Make a note, we should take a look at it. Could be a power outage, maybe.

Seems weirdly convenient, though."

Steve noted it down, nodding solemnly. If someone had cut the power at that fuse box or even from elsewhere in the building, they would have seen them on the camera just before. Perhaps there was something they weren't seeing. "I'll make a copy, we can look into it more closely back at the station."

Hopper hummed in thought.

"The radio in the workshop was fried. Dead as a dodo..." He wasn't keeping anything from his partner. Not from Steve. "Power surge maybe. Was it stormy last night?"

Steve frowned thoughtfully before slowly shaking his head. "No way, it was a clear night last night - I was out at Mrs.Jessops farm from around that time and there wasn't even a cloud in the sky."

Powell definitely wouldn't of entertained Steve wanting to investigate more at the farm if it had been storming.

A coldness went through the younger man, eyes catching with Hoppers for a moment before looking back to the paperwork. There was no way that Steve was even going to entertain the idea about the electric being anything but faulty, not at this point. It had been five years. As far as he was concerned, everything abnormal about Hawkins was in the past and that was where it was going to stay. They'd closed the gate, beat the monsters, and everything was back to normal for good.

Hopper opened his mouth to ask another question, faltering for a few moments before he spoke. Watching over the footage again, Hargrove looked anything but angry as he strolled out of his fancy muscle car with a cigarette in his lips. Not that he could make out the man's expression from the crummy camera, but there was something about his gait and general being that didn't scream 'I've come here to kill a guy.' Not everyone was going to look like a killer though, he supposed.

"I know you don't know the guy anymore, but... do you think Billy seems the type?"

Steve had the most experience with the guy. But pummeling someone was still not the same as tearing their flesh apart with a crowbar and lord knows what else. Jim was glad not to have Powell or Callahan with him; they would have seen the Camaro pull up and pushed to arrest Hargrove immediately. Flaky officers at best, as much as he loved them.

Steve frowned. It had been some years since they'd been at school together and they'd barely passed each other in the street in that time. Steve still saw Max occasionally, like he kept up with all the kids. Not that they appreciated it so much anymore, all entering their late teens, besides Dustin. Dustin had become his little brother and he'd watched him grow up into a man, always years beyond his age, but now more than ever. They'd celebrated Dustin's 18th birthday a few weeks back... it still felt very surreal.

"I don't think so but... I don't know." The last conversation with Max hadn't really touched on her step-brother, only mentioning off-handed that he'd been working to get his shit together. "Max seems to think that he's been doing well the last few years, cleaning his act up, you know? I don't think he's the person he was in high school but even then..."

Running a hand through his hair he gave another sigh. There wasn't really any reason to defend the guy, just a feeling he had. Steve had to trust his instincts because at the end of the day, they were all he had. "I don't think he would have been capable of this sort of shit."

"Well, it's best we get his side of the story as soon as possible," Hopper sighed. He flicked through the employee file he'd pulled out until he found an address. "He lives over on Pine Park, number 33B. Seeing as he's not in work, I expect he'll be there."

He took a moment to contemplate, and eyed the coffee machine in the corner of the office longingly. Digging out his keys, he dumped them on Steve's lap. "Head over there and get the lowdown. Take my car. I've got to sit tight and wait for Gary, so I'll grab a ride over to the morgue with him and figure it out from there."

Steve agreed, ejecting the tape for the security footage and inserting a new blank one from the stack beside the desk. "You want this

bagged?"

"I'll do it," Hopper dismissed, taking it from Steve's hand. After another moment of pause, he stood and clapped Steve on the shoulder one more time. "And Harrington? Have your gun on you, just in case. I'm sure it's nothing, but suspects can be... volatile when you start pointing fingers."

Giving his best 'this isn't stressful' smile, he turned and grappled with the coffee machine until it came to life.

The warning to carry a gun made Steve uncomfortable, but he had to hope for the best but prepare for the worst.

"Don't get too carried away with that coffee machine, alright?" He replied, tossing the keys in his hands as he stood, attempting to lighten the mood slightly. He gave Hop his best grin and winked. "I don't want another one filing a harassment charge against you mishandling it."

He couldn't say he wasn't glad to be leaving that building. The smell of death felt as though it had made its way into the fibres of his shirt and he couldn't shake the coppery taste from his mouth.

The drive felt like it was over much too quickly; Pine Park was a housing estate and trailer park on the far side of the forest, on the interstate leading out of Hawkins. It was a nice area, but the park itself was rundown by the residents - the kind of people Steve spent many Saturday nights locking up or fining after bar fights and noise complaints. Of all the places Billy Hargrove could have ended up, Steve never would have guessed here. He thought the guy may have gotten out of Hawkins, maybe gone back to California, seeing as he'd always bragged about the place so much.

Apparently not. Pulling in front of the trailer with the number 33B hand-painted and flaking off next to the door, Steve sat in silence for a moment, hand drifting to his holster and tapping it reassuringly.

I won't need to use this.

He tried to convince himself, stepping out of the vehicle and heading to the front door.

His heart was racing again, thundering against his chest as he got closer and closer. Their last real encounter years ago - shortly after the gate had been closed and his face had recovered from their fight - hadn't been too favourable and now... he was sure there were other people Billy would rather see, especially considering the circumstances. Knuckles rapped briskly on the door as he turned to look out at the surrounding area. Shit, the place looked run down, worse than he remembered.

Billy Hargrove's trailer home sat in the far back corner of Pine Park next an empty lot, the Camaro parked with a tarpaulin thrown over it. The whole estate was a dump; the grass was thin from being trampled and littered with cigarette stubs and beer cans, the mud churned up from all sorts of tires. Most of his neighbours looked rough, at least those had Steve had driven past on the way in. The small plastic placard next to the trailer door said 'beware of the dog', and as he rapped his knuckles on the front door, a dog started barking on cue.

Perhaps 'animal as murder weapon' wasn't so far fetched after all. In his head he could picture Billy with some tremendous beast on a chain, siccing it on Greg Richards as they argued. He cringed as the memory of the body flooded his mind once again. That wasn't what happened. There was no point speculating yet - and anyway, there'd been no dog on the tape.

The sound of the dog barking was loud enough to cause curtains to twitch in the nearby trailers, beady eyes poking through to look at what was going on. Steve gave a brisk wave to one set, which quickly receded much to his amusement. They must have thought he was doing some sort of random check - probably all crapping their pants right about now in case he knocked on their door too.

The door opened for Steve eventually, but it wasn't Billy. Instead, the bright blue eyes of a small, dusty haired little boy stared up at the police officer in a moment of shocked silence. He looked no older

than five or six.

"Hi," the little boy said, in a very timid voice. Steve looked down at the child, confusion crossing his face momentarily before it softened into a smile.

"Hi the-"

"Joey, don't open the-- fuck!" Billy appeared behind the boy before Steve could even introduce himself, scooping him off the ground onto his hip and taking a moment to give him a pointed look before he finally looked up at the visitor. He gave the officer a once over, brows drawing together in confusion and face twisting from surprise into sudden concern. "...Harrington? What the fuck are you doing here?"

The other man sported a purpling bruise on his jawline and another wound on his forearm had been haphazardly wrapped in makeshift dressings already. He looked like shit, eyes bloodshot and framed with dark circles, more stubble on his jaw than Steve remembered. Just from the sight of him, this already wasn't stacking up well for the man.

His hair was shorter - and flatter, although it still hung about his face in waves - than it had been when he was younger but besides that he hadn't changed much, still slim and extremely well built.

At least the barking had stopped. Offering a small attempt at a smile, Steve tilted his head towards the neighbours trailer pointedly. "Can I come in?"

Please, please have a good excuse.

Billy felt frozen to the spot for a moment, arm tightening around the little boy in his arms until he felt the kid prodding at his injured shoulder. He snapped out of it and gave the child a scolding look. "Ow, Joey, Jesus!"

The little boy simply laughed and held on tightly to Billy's neck, burying his face in his shoulder. Shaking his head, Billy took another deep breath and motioned with his head for Steve to come in quickly,

poking his head around the door frame before he shut it after them.

As soon as the door was closed, the dog started barking again. Steve looked around for the animal, expecting something vicious looking - a rottweiler or some other large animal that could tear through human flesh like it was paper. Billy spun around to scold the animal and a wash of relief flooded over Steve. The huge noise was coming from a tiny ginger fluff ball in the kitchen doorway, barely a dog at all, which sat and howled as soon as it had his attention.

"Art, shuddup!" Throwing another look at Steve, Billy grimaced, his voice filled with mocking. "It's a fucking madhouse in here. To what do I owe the pleasure of your company, princess?"

The cop actually gave a smile at the nickname, eyebrows raised. Damn, he hadn't heard that in years. It was almost nostalgic, if it didn't conjure up memories of Billy trying to smash his head into the ground or trip him on the basketball court. The man before him was a nasty piece of work back then, maybe even still, although it looked like life had dealt him right what he'd dealt others for years. Despite the rough edges, he was still as handsome as ever. Steve had always imagined him making something of his looks - he didn't think Billy had the brains to match, but he had a face that drove everyone wild - and settling down on a small fortune. The back end of a trailer park was almost a disappointment.

You can do better than that, Hargrove. Come on.

"No worries, mind if I - uh..." He glanced around at the inside of trailer looking for somewhere to sit. There was no clear surface anywhere. From the piles of clothes and bottles to kids toys strewn about the place, it was amazing that they could even stand right now. Shaking his head, he decided against asking. "Never mind... Can we talk in private for a minute, please?"

Steve was damned if he was going to talk about Billy's whereabouts last night in front of the kid. Who's kid was he anyway? Billy's? Christ, they really didn't know each other any more did they? The dog trotted around them, sniffing at Steve's trousers and wagging its tail, clearly pleased that there were people in the room now. Cute, but it didn't suit Billy.

"...Sure. Gimme a second." Billy carried Joey through to the couch and brushed it off, chucking some magazines and dirty laundry out the way so the kid could actually sit down. Steve watched from the doorway in slight disbelief as Billy turned the TV on quietly and crouched in front of the little boy, stroking his hair down and looking him in the eyes.

"Billy's gotta talk with the nice cop, alright bud? So I need you to stay in here for me. Then we'll figure out where the hell your mama's gone, okay?"

He came back after getting a reluctant nod out of the quiet kid and gave Steve a look that said 'don't say a fucking thing' as he passed him by into the kitchen. He went through the same motion of hauling some of the mess aside to clear a space at one end of the small wooden table by the window and pulled a seat out for Steve before sitting down himself, making sure the ugly curtains were drawn so no one could look in on them talking. "Alright Harrington, you've got my full attention."

"Cute kid. Yours...?" Steve asked as he followed Billy, taking the offered seat and slipping into it. His mouth went dry as they sat down. He'd never imagined he'd have to deliver this type of news for the first time on his own; the more he thought about it the more nervous he got. Hopper trusted him with a lot of things, but maybe this was a little too over his head.

"Nah, god no," Billy laughed faintly, resting his elbows on the table and raking his fingers through his messy hair. He knew he looked just as awful as he felt right now.

Now that there was no small child obstructing his view, Steve could see just how beat up the other man was. As well as the bruises, he could see four deep scratches on one shoulder, just visible through the open neckline of his oil stained short-sleeve shirt which was dotted with dried blood at the shoulder and just where the shirt was hidden behind the table.

"There's been an incident, over at the auto shop." He started, tugging his notebook out and watching Billy for any reaction. "I just wanna ask you some questions."

3. Witness

"Sure, ask away. Whatever you're here for, I've got nothing to hide."

There was the first lie. Billy was definitely avoiding eye contact, the expression on his face sitting uneasy with Steve. At least he seemed to be complying.

"Where were you last night between 2:30pm and 8pm?"

He gave him a bit of leeway there, to see if he was going to try to make something up or if he was going to tell the truth. Fuck, Steve felt weird about doing this. It wasn't as if he cared about Billy - nor had he ever cared about him - but the guy sat before him wasn't the same person that had antagonised him only a few years ago. Max had said he was trying to clean up his act after all... No, there could be no bias here. Steve couldn't let his own opinions cloud his judgments.

At least it was likely Billy wasn't going to try punching a cop, even if it was him.

"I was..." Billy paused to think about his answer and Steve wondered if he was about to try and pull the wool over his eyes. "At home until like... two? I guess. Then I headed over to the shop to ask old man Richards for an advance. I left a little after that and I was-"

The confidence on Billy's face flickered for a moment. "I don't know. Out on the road. Home a bit after that."

It was a vague start at best.

"Okay," He nodded, leaning on the counter as he eyed the blonde. He would make notes later - he figured right now it might come across as threatening if he started intensely journalling every comment Billy made. "I'm going to need you to give me more than that."

Billy Hargrove used to be so volatile, even the smallest thing would set him off, send his fists flying. Considering that Billy hadn't laid him flat the moment he'd opened the door, Steve allowed himself a spark of hope that perhaps the guy had changed his tune over the years,

but he wasn't willing to bet on it. Maybe it was the small blessing of there being a small child present in the house that was keeping his nasty side at bay.

Maybe not.

Steve decided to take a gamble.

He sat forward a little, staring straight into those blue eyes. "Your employer, Mr. Richards, was found dead this morning. I don't think you've got it in you to-- look, just answer the question for me."

Why was he already so convinced that Billy was innocent? There was no evidence to show it, yet Steve felt it. That wasn't going to fly in a court of law. "What happened when you got to the garage? And where did you go afterwards?"

"I didn't kill Greg, Harrington," Billy spat out through his teeth, his words not full of malice but frustration.

The conviction in his statement all but admitted he knew Greg had been murdered. Steve's heart dropped into the pit of his stomach. The odds were stacking up against Billy already, but there was still time for him to turn it around. And if Hop had taught him anything, it was that the truth always came out in the end.

"I went to the garage to ask for an advance," Billy repeated, slower as though he was talking to a child. "And he wouldn't give it to me. Not to speak ill of the dead, but the guy was an ass when he wanted to be. He knows I'm in some shit right now, but he wasn't budging. I've worked for him for two fucking years and..."

Shaking his head, Billy reached across the table to grab his half-crushed cigarette packet and pull an unbroken one out. Steve watched his hand and swore it was shaking slightly, but maybe he was seeing things. His outburst was heated and there was a certainty in the tone of his voice that caught Steve's attention as the man lit up his cigarette.

Billy exhaled slowly before continuing, smoke dancing up around his face. "None of that even matters. What matters is that we got into it,

and I left. I didn't fucking kill him."

He believed Billy. He shouldn't have. It was his job to remain impartial and take in all the facts first. Under no circumstances could he admit to believing Billy; Hop would kill him if he did, and if Billy found out he'd use it against him somehow.

Taking a breath, Steve gave a slow nod, eyes closed for a moment as he thought over his words. A voice in the back of his head whispered to him, demanding he not let himself be compromised. He shouldn't have been allowing himself to pity the other man, no matter his situation. Billy probably didn't want his pity any more than he deserved it.

Dark eyes flicked open and Steve sat back again in his seat.

"Did anything happen whilst you were there? Anything weird..." His mind filled in the gaps. There were things he didn't want to entertain after five years. "Or out of place?"

"No."

He flipped out his notebook at last, something to distract himself before he worried all the skin off of his bottom lip. Steve gave a moment of hesitation before prompting with another question (another faux pas, Christ. Why was he trusted to do this alone?). "Was there an electrical surge?"

"No, nothing like that..." Billy squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, face distorted with frustration. Steve recalled Hopper talking about interrogation techniques some fifteen or so months ago; he knew being silent and waiting would coax more of an answer out of Billy, especially if the man was hiding something. Liars couldn't stand silence.

So he waited.

"Are we done?" Billy snarked, eyebrow raised.

Steve looked back at him, unwavering. He kept waiting, and eventually Billy started to crack.

"Look, this is how it happened. I showed up. We argued, I got really pissed at him and-- and I hit him," he breathed out slowly. "Square in the face. Broke his nose, I think. He had blood pouring down his chin, he told me to get out, and not come back. So I did."

He held the silence. Steve's pen was poised to note down what Billy had said, but he wanted to the other man to know he was still waiting for more details.

"When I was leaving, I heard him yell something but I guess I didn't really give a shit 'cause I just kept going. If he's dead..." Billy looked up at Steve at last. If he was lying now, he was lying without a hint of guilt in his eyes, staring Steve down. Steve kept his mouth closed just a moment more, just one last try to see what he could squeeze out of his suspect. "I guess I left him there to die. Whatever got him. That enough, Officer?"

His last words were full of poison this time, a firm demand for the questions to stop.

It was the wording of that phrase gave Steve pause, eyes narrowing as he tried fitting Billy's story with what he knew from the scene. If one of the other guys had been sent here, Hargrove would've had the book thrown at him the moment he opened the front door. Hell, he'd probably be in handcuffs by now. It wasn't adding up right.

"Might be, might not be," He said, raising his eyebrows at Billy before starting to take note of everything he'd just been told. He hoped the other man got the message - this was going on record, and if he was lying, even if he was innocent, he'd get done for obstructing justice.

"Let's just talk about something else, shall we?" Billy tutted, flicking his cigarette ash into a dirty cereal bowl. "Like when did Hawkins' lil princess get his pretty badge?"

It was clear that Billy was done talking about it. Steve gave a soft sigh. Maybe it was enough to get Hopper to listen to him; he knew that his verdict would be trusted and that he was held in high regard by all the station, no matter how much they teased him for being so young. It was going to be a stretch to make them listen to this but... Hopper trusted him. He could make them back off from pointing

fingers.

Cut him some slack, let him relax again and then bring the conversation back round, easy.

"Awh, you think it's pretty?" He teased lightly, a challenging smile tugging at his lips. "This is my second year. Beats working for my old man."

"Sure," Billy joked. His unwavering expression gave nothing away, but Steve got the sense he was relieved to hear the conversation moving on. "Pretty badge for a pretty boy."

Steve laughed slightly at the comment, almost feeling like they were in high school again. Maybe they could've been friends at one point, if things had been different. He'd never said it, but he'd enjoyed the competition that Billy's challenges had brought back to his soul; it was what he'd needed back then, when his life was a mess. Billy's life was as much of a mess now as it always had been - he'd obviously been dealt a new bad hand in life at the end of every round. Steve felt a pang of guilt that he'd probably never repay the favour.

The dog yapped at his ankles, interrupting his thoughts.

"Sounds like life is treating you well..." Billy said, scooping the small dog up onto his lap. It quietened the animal but it started jumping up at Billy's shoulders incessantly, unable to stay still. The sight made Steve smile a little.

"Cute."

Billy brought the dog up to his face with one hand and nuzzled its head, eyeing Steve as he did so with a sharp look in his eye. He didn't need to speak; that face alone challenged Steve to dare calling him cute again.

The small ball of fluff kicked at Billy's shoulder and the man winced, quickly trying to hide it with another drag of his cigarette.

"Do you need a hand...rewrapping those...?" Steve asked, nodding towards the loose bandages on Billy's arm as he did. His voice was quiet, careful as though he was dealing with a wild animal that might

bolt at any moment, though that wasn't Hargrove's usual MO. He wasn't sure Billy had an ounce of the 'flight' part of the flight or fight response in him. Still, it felt dangerous to be offering to help with something that looked like it related to last night. The blood flecks on his shirt, the bruises on his face... They didn't add up to a punch and run. "You did a shitty job."

Another tactical smile, attempting to keep the mood lighter. If they kept this up, he was confident he'd get what he needed.

Perhaps not.

As the conversation came around to his injuries, the smile dropped off Billy's face.

"Yeah, I did."

"I can clean them up for you right here. Probably keep them from going septic."

Billy huffed, shoulders sagging. "There's nothing to patch them with." A curt laugh dismissed any distress he was feeling. "Hurts like a bitch, though."

That wasn't a no and Steve was going to take it with both hands. "Not a problem."

He stood from the chair, tucking it back underneath the table as he did. "I have a first aid kit in the patrol car, gimme two secs, ok?"

He didn't wait for an answer, heading back to the front door and out, closing the bug-net door over as he left.

He could get somewhere with this; the wounds were nasty, it looked like Billy had lost blood and definitely didn't look like anything he'd get from a fist fight. He returned with the first aid kit from Hopper's glove compartment, making a mental note to replace it later.

"Now, you cannot hold me accountable for my first aid skills," He said as he stepped back into the kitchen. "I'm a cop, not a nurse."

He found Billy standing by the sink, knocking back something out of a glass in a way that he wouldn't if it wasn't alcohol. Steve didn't say a word. He'd probably want a drink too, if their roles were reversed. He's relieved, at least, that Billy didn't bolt in his absence.

"Can't be worse than mine," Billy laughed half-heartedly. "Alright, patch me up Princess."

He began unbuttoning his shirt, the fabric peeling away from the forming scab and a few pin pricks of fresh blood surfaced around the deep, congealed scratch marks. Steve placed the first aid kit down on a clear part of the table, eyes tracing over Billy's torso as he shed his clothing, his expression grim at the sight of the fresh wounds.

They were definitely not from a fist fight.

His body was still in peak condition besides the injuries; muscular and strong with just a couple of curls of blonde hair, barely visible on his chest, and a trail down from his naval. Steve can't help noticing he was littered older scars, lumpy and white - they look like knife wounds, made in hatred with drunken hand, the worst of which almost spelt out a word, illegible. Billy was unblinking as he undresses, picking off the shitty bandages from the wounds on his arm and tugging his waistband down a little further to reveal another wound on his stomach, already well-wrapped and concealed from view.

"Christ, Hargrove..." The quiet words were muttered almost under his breath as Steve took in the sight. He busied himself getting antiseptic out and opening a sanitised cloth.

Steve cleaned the wound on Billy's arm first, before moving onto his shoulder. They were definitely made by an animal of some description; his mind turned over stupid possibilities of how an animal could have been involved in the attack and how Billy could have got away in desperation, another victim and an innocent party to the whole scene.

He didn't know nearly enough to make that assumption. And yet he could see Billy zoning out as he works his way across the wounds; it rang alarm bells and he moved as carefully as he could, fingers just

dusting across Harrington's collar bone and chest.

Pressing too hard by mistake, he muttered an apology, but Billy didn't so much as flinch.

"What the hell made these?" He eventually asked.

"Nothing," Billy sneered. "Nothing to do with the garage, or that I'm gonna talk about with you."

He clenched his jaw and pulled away, hands in his hair as he crossed to the back door of the trailer and stared out into the woods beyond.

Steve's hands fell to his side, the cloth still dangling from his fingers. It was dotted with blood stains. He followed, tentatively, placing a his fingertips against Billy's uninjured shoulder to alert him to his presence.

"At least let me finish up."

Fingers dropping as he waited for the other man to turn, to give his permission before he touched him again. Something in the back of his mind making him question just how used to this sort of attention Billy was anymore.

"But," He can't bite his tongue, words slipping out without permission. "If there's a dangerous animal or something then it needs to be dealt with."

Animals made sense. Billy's reaction, the mangled corpse back at the garage - they didn't make sense.

"I'm not expecting you to just straight up trust me here. But give me the benefit of any doubts you got against me - alright?"

Billy's whole body seemed to stiffen as Steve went on. The quiet between them was deafening. Steve traced over Billy's back with his gaze, noting how tense he was, noting more bruises and older scars. He wanted to say something more, but at this point he'd just be filling dead air.

Before he could, Billy turned back to face him. There was fire in his

blue eyes, the sort of fire that could burn them both if he unleashed it. It shook Steve and he knew he was treading on thin ice.

"I told you, it's nothing to do with Richards." He snapped again, jabbing a finger towards Steve. "It's my own shit and I don't have to tell you fuck all about it if it's not relevant. So stop pussyfooting about and finish cleaning me up already, or don't. Just stop-- stop fucking talking to me like that. I'm not made of glass."

"I know you're not--" Steve ran a hand through his hair, losing his patience. "I know you're not glass. Jesus."

He picked up the bandages and started to wrap the wounds tightly, with far less care for being gentle as he had given cleaning them. Billy still didn't flinch, staring stubbornly at the wall as Steve bandaged him, jaw visibly clenched. Steve looked him up and down once more, knowing there wasn't much else he could do. He didn't have enough in the first aid kit to replace the bandage on Billy's abdomen. It wasn't a perfect job but at least it was better than what had been there; with any luck, the wounds wouldn't go septic now and hopefully he'd gained an inch in getting the other man to trust him.

With an inward sigh, he tried once again. "Is there anything else you can tell me?"

Billy's eyes snapped to him, full of anger and daring. His lips stayed firmly shut. It would be dangerous to push more; Steve's mind flicked to his holstered gun but he refused to entertain the idea of using it - walking away would be easier if it came to it. They stared each other down, neither budging an inch, Billy looking vexed and menacing and Steve calm and collected. He had his hands on his hips, daring him to overstep boundaries. If Billy had any sense, he wouldn't push a cop.

Although at least then, I could take him in.

Taking him in as a murder suspect was a big deal. Even if he was proven innocent, it would sully Billy's reputation permanently and he couldn't do that, not based on circumstantial evidence. Not after seeing how the man lived. At least if Billy hit him right now, he could

take him in for something solid. Lock him up and question him properly about Richards, with Hopper's guidance.

The expression on Billy's face softened suddenly and it took a moment for Steve to realise he was now staring past him. He brushed by and picked up the little boy, who was standing in the kitchen doorway staring mutely at them.

"Hey bud, you okay? You hungry?"

Joey nodded, hiding his face in Billy's chest. Billy carried him over to the cupboards, looking through them one handed for something to eat. Steve's heart melted at the sight; he was a sucker for kids and the thought of taking Billy back to the station became less appealing with every second the scene before him played out. He watched Billy mix the dregs of various cereal boxes and sit Joey on the counter with a spoon before starting to tidy the countertop around him, aimlessly moving the mess around.

"You got more questions or are you hoping I'm going to offer you breakfast too?" Billy said without looking at him.

Steve faltered, shook himself out of it. "Right. No, not at the moment."

He gathered up his notebook, tucking it neatly back into his pocket. This wasn't over, but he got the feeling he'd be getting nothing else out of Billy Hargrove today.

Billy followed him to the door, leaning in the door frame as Steve stepped outside.

"Let me know if you catch the guy," he said confidently. Steve frowned, turning around to face him one more time.

"Just... don't leave town, alright?" He sighed, more frustrated than anything. "If nothing else, we're probably going to need your testimony at some point."

This day had already been a write off. He replayed the events of that morning over in his mind as he started up Hopper's car, still feeling sick at the thought of the crime scene. He was going back to the

station with nothing, nothing useful. Billy hadn't told the whole truth - he knew that without a doubt - and so he had no story to back up why he believed the other man was innocent. With the violent attitude Billy still gave off, he wasn't even sure himself why he didn't think the man could have done it. He could shed no light on the murder. The trip had been completely unhelpful and he hoped that Hopper had at least come away with something to get them started.

As he pulled away, he watched Billy Hargrove in the rear view, staring after the car and sparking up another cigarette. Steve had a feeling his life was about to get a whole lot more complicated.

4. L'Argent

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for the delays in this chapter! My co-writer and I have just moved house, so chapters might be a little here and there whilst we get sorted but this fic is at the forefront of my mind 24/7. Can't wait to unveil what we've got in store.

Also, check out this utterly incredible piece idkmybffspock drew from Chapter 2 over on Tumblr: <http://idkmybffspock.tumblr.com/post/167966669250/wip-troubled-waters-by-paperstorms-0becki>

Fan art for our story ;3; we are not worthy <3

Coffee was the number one agent in getting Jim Hopper into a good mood. Steve had learned it early on in his new position; 'Coffee and contemplation' were two staples of the Chief's day and the younger officer needed all the help he could get with the talk he needed to have about Billy Hargrove. He wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not that he didn't need to order at the diner anymore - whenever he walked in, the waitress would just shoot him a wink and tell him to take a seat as 'she'd bring it over in a second.'

What he was pretty sure of was that his solo trips to the diner always ended up taking longer then they needed to when Mandy was on shift.

"Anything else I can get you today?" She added, batting her eyelashes at him and leaning over the counter far more than was necessary. "Maybe something sweet? I've got a nice slice of Cherry Pie back here with your name on it."

"Just Hopper's usual," he said, shooting her a polite smile back. She seemed to take it as a victory, although she pouted all the same and told him he was missing out.

As he took a seat in the tiny booth by the door - his designated waiting spot, mainly for a quick getaway - Steve could see the waitress trying to sneak glances at him from behind the coffee machine, a naughty twinkle in her eye as she caught his. He responded with the same smile again, trying not to feel awkward. Steve hadn't been so much of a flirt in the last few years; he was sure he was capable of it, but the desire to flirt with anyone hadn't been there for quite a long time.

It wasn't from complete lack of trying that Steve had found himself single in recent years. After Nancy, he'd thought his heart irreparably broken but a few months later he'd enjoyed a brief rebound relationship with a girl in his year called Samantha and he'd realised how stupid his heartbreak had really been. He'd known from the beginning that Nancy and Jonathan belonged together; in fact, they were still together now even after Nancy had gone out of state for college and Jonathan had stayed behind. Jonathan had waited, working at the AV store and visiting her once a month. Nancy had tried to fix their friendship and Steve tried to let her, being the best friend he could possibly manage. She'd told Steve a few times on the phone that she missed him, that long distance was hard, and that maybe she was making a mistake with Jonathan... but she'd waited too, and she'd finally come home to Hawkins to a very happy reunion. Steve was happy for them, he really was.

After Samantha, Steve had flitted between some relationships, none of them ever lasting more than a few months. Girls still liked him - and hell, he still liked girls, a lot - but after everything that had happened, he found he just couldn't be the person he was before Nancy, and before the Upside Down. He didn't keep many close friends besides Hopper and Dustin, and since he'd gotten his badge, he'd hung out mostly with the guys from the station. Callahan liked to tease him, said he was 'married to his job', called him 'wasted youth' after finding out Steve had been single for over a year. Steve had just shrugged and made a joke about Callahan's wife that Hopper found so funny he'd let Steve have the last donut.

The honest truth was, he just didn't feel like looking for someone. It never felt like the right time.

And it certainly didn't feel like the right time with Mandy from the

diner, who was at least ten years older than him and badly needed her hair re-permed. As she brought his order, she brushed the curls out of her face and Steve couldn't help but notice how she looked overworked. Damn, he felt bad for her. He thanked her with a decent tip and threw her a wink on his way out the door, hoping it might at least lift her spirits for a while.

The smell of coffee and donuts filled the office first, and Steve got a knowing laugh from Callaghan as they collided in the corridor.

"That sort of morning, huh?" Powell stated grimly, catching up with his partner.

Steve gave him an equally grim look in response, deflecting before he had to talk about it right then and there. "Where are you two headed out to?"

"Next of kin," Callahan said, looking uncharacteristically miserable over the duty bestowed on the two of them. Steve had never had to deliver the news of someone's death before, but he had attended one with Hopper in his first month of being on the force, and he dreaded the day he had to do so himself. "And digging up any family dirt on the guy. Double whammy."

Powell was eyeing the brown bag in Steve's hand, the smell wafting through the air and the grease off the fresh donuts seeping through the paper. "You could spare a couple of those, you know, for the journey. We've got to head on over to the city..."

"Get your own on the way, lazy sods." Steve lifted the bag out of arms reach. "You know Hop's going to want all of them."

"Suck up," Callahan teased, lightening up a little and making a grab for them. "You gonna lick his boots clean whilst you're at it, Harrington?"

Steve laughed, brushing past them and wishing them luck. At least they hadn't had to see the body. The image was still burned into his mind as clear as day and it felt like he'd not get it out of his mind

even if he clawed his eyes out. As he headed towards the office near the back, his smile twisted into a grimace.

"Knock, knock..." Toeing the door to Hopper's office lightly, it swung open to let Steve into the room, cups of coffee in hand and the small bag of donuts gripped tightly and dangling from his clenched fist. He offered up what wanted to be an encouraging smile. "Figured we needed a little energy boost before we got started."

Hopper was just putting out the last of three cigarettes he'd smoked in a row when Steve entered. The cigarette smoke wafted out before the door could swing closed again, and he could see a judging look on Flo's face down the hall. He shot one right back at her - he wasn't having a good day so far and neither should anyone else.

"Oh boy, you're spoiling me." He grinned, the expression still tainted with the stress of their investigation. The smell of fresh coffee and donuts changed everything. He nudged the other chair at his desk out with his foot so Steve could sit down, taking one of the coffee cups as soon as it was in reach. "I'll give you the lowdown on what I've found first, because there's not much to say."

Hopper had arrived back at the station with a dark cloud hanging above his head. Riding in the back of a morgue transportation vehicle was very unsettling, especially when the contents of the body bag beside him mostly had to be scraped off the floor. He wouldn't have wished something that brutal on even the people he hated the most in the world.

There hadn't been much they could determine at the scene; he'd investigated some blood spatter patterns whilst Gary had examined the body and found exactly what he'd expected - that Greg Richards had been massacred, blood everywhere. There was some thrown back at high velocity, off of what he imagined was the crowbar being swung. He'd made his notes, and asked Gary for his immediate conclusions.

"Doesn't look like something a human could achieve on their own," he'd said with a deep set frown. "I'd say there had to be an

accomplice to achieve this sort of damage. Human or animal."

Gary would let him know if he found traces of animal hairs or anything similar later on. They had an estimated time of death, around 6.26pm - right at the same time the cameras at the auto shop cut, which was starting to feel less like a coincidence despite no evidence to the back the theory up - and a probable cause, disgruntled employees, however weak that felt. As he explained the findings to Steve, Hopper's mind swum with possibilities; that Richards had been involved in something more serious, that it had been a mob hit or an escaped serial killer, but he knew there was no point in speculating until he had more to go on.

As he marched through the station to his office, he gave Powell and Callahan orders to deliver the bad news to Richards' next of kin and investigate any familial troubles he

"He's going to be thorough in looking for evidence of animal involvement." Hopper shook his head, stuffing his hand noisily into the bag of donuts. "But otherwise, we could be looking for two human suspects."

"Shit," Steve said, clutching his own coffee to his chest to warm up. "Well... Hargrove wasn't giving much up, but if someone else was involved, that might explain that."

With a heavy sigh, Hopper took a moment to contemplate what that meant one more time - that there was not one, but two dangerous unknown subjects in the streets of Hawkins - before sinking his teeth into the sugary treat and mumbling through his mouthful. "Right, Hargrove. Tell me everything."

Steve had spent the entire journey over here, including his pit stop at the diner with Mandy, trying to work out how to talk about this. He took a breath, leaning back in his chair with the coffee in hand.

"I don't think Hargrove did it."

Better to be honest straight up rather than try and beat around the issue. And shit, what an issue it was/ Billy had been their only suspect and if it turned out that Steve's hunch was on the money then

it was gonna cause an even bigger headache.

"Okay," Hopper said patiently, his face giving nothing away as to whether he believed Steve or not. "I'm going to need more than that."

"Everything he said it...it fit into the timeline. He admitted to being there, getting into an argument with Richards." A hand went through his hair, pushing it around messily as he thought it over. "Hell, he even admitted to punching the guy."

It was more than enough to convince anyone else that he was a suspect, if not that he was straight up guilty but... "There was something else though, something I just... I dunno."

Steve shifted in his seat, sitting forward again and leaning on his knees. He started to recall the scene the best he could, describing the state of Billy's home, the way the man had shifted between calm and angry, and then skittish... the claw marks and other injuries Billy had sported. He was barely talking to Hopper anymore, more like talking to himself as he tried to word his thoughts on the matter properly. "He got stand-offish when I tried to get him to tell me what caused them. Barely even let me clean him up."

So much for this being a relaxed conversation. Steve was on edge again, squeezing the coffee cup in his hands as though it might give him some grip on the situation as he sat staring towards Hopper on the other side of the desk.

"There's something else going on here, Hop. I know there is."

Hopper rubbed his forehead and let out a frustrated groan.

"Sounds like a real mess up. Are you sure about this?"

"I'm serious, Hop. He said I didn't do it and I believe him. Just something on his face."

The more and more he put it into words, the less and less his argument sounded solid. He had nothing to back up his analysis, and the odds were stacking up against Billy. Steve knew it sounded as though he could have done it. Getting into it with Richards and being covered in wounds didn't look good for him... but there were still

huge holes in the evidence he did do it, too.

"Sounds like he's hiding something. Not that I don't trust your judgement, kiddo." With a sigh, Hopper put his half-finished donut down and ran his hands over his face. "You should trust your instincts. But I don't think we can let him off that easily. We're going to need to know more about how he got those wounds. Between those and the blank spot on the tape, there are too many coincidences going on here... something has to be connected, you know? I'm willing to bet it all is, somehow."

Steve nodded, visibly deflating. He knew this would happen, but having so little to go on and none of the pieces fitting together right was disheartening. Hopper felt for him; it was early days still but he had hoped they'd wrap this up quickly too. Hawkins was the sort of town that wouldn't handle this news well. He still remembered how the news of Will Byers' disappearance had gone down six years earlier, how the town had been nothing but whispers and theories and quietly pointed fingers from behind net curtains. People could be terrible when they wanted to.

If Hargrove was hiding something, at least a second suspect would make sense.

"And we need to find out if he's protecting someone," Hopper added. Steve nodded again, still solemn.

"Sure, Chief. I'll speak to him again when Gary's finished his examination."

"Chin up, Harrington. I'm on your side, alright?" Hopper trusted Steve's instincts. If Steve was having doubts, they were worth investigating. "Remember the Anderson case? I couldn't have done that without you. If there's a connection here, you'll find it."

Hawkins, 1987

The sounds of a woman crying floated through the halls from the living room; inside Penny Anderson was sat on the couch curled into her

husband, Harold. Steve and Hopper sat across from her in two gaudy floral armchairs. The whole house was dated, stuck in post-war Hawkins with kitschy decor and sad, worn-out furnishings. Steve shifted awkwardly, avoiding looking at the woman as she sobbed, instead eyeing the faded photographs hung sporadically on the wall. All of them were old, most of them black and white. It was sad to think the couple hadn't made new memories worth putting up on the wall. The freshest - and cleanest - looking picture was of a younger man in a graduation cap and gown; their son Joseph, estranged for several years.

"You can see how hard the loss has hit our family, Chief." Harold said, stroking his older wife's back gently as he looked up at Hopper. They had called for a burglary - a gold and ruby necklace, amongst other small pieces of jewellery, had gone missing over the weekend whilst they vacationing by the lakes. "The jewellery was an heirloom from her great, great grandmother... it was priceless."

At that, another sob came from Mrs. Anderson as she shook in his arms.

"P-P-riceless..." She repeated, looking up towards them with mascara stained tears streaming down her face. Steve flustered at the sight, not sure how to console her, busying himself with the brand new notebook that Hopper had given him outside.

"I assure you, Mrs. Anderson, we'll find that necklace." Hopper spoke with a calm conviction Steve could only hope to achieve. He looked up, glancing between the Chief and the older woman, expecting Hopper's words to calm her but finding only a strange look on her face. Not upset, but distressed; something he couldn't put his finger on.

Before he could say anything, Hopper was prompting him to ask questions.

"Uh, you said you couldn't see any signs of a break in?" He fumbled, looking to Hopper for reassurance that he'd said the right thing. Hopper gave him a curt nod and so he continued, "Is there anyone at all who has a spare key, or may know where you keep a spare key?"

They left a few minutes afterwards, a comforting word from Hopper as they parted at the door and headed to the car. When they were safely inside and pulling away down the drive, Steve gave a sigh of relief he

hadn't realised he had been holding onto.

"I don't think I've ever seen anyone cry like that - especially not over jewellery."

"Me neither," Hopper admitted with a quiet sigh. "But there's no accounting for heirlooms. People get more attached to them than the people they came from in the first place..."

He grumbled as he turned further up the street. They'd given the house a quick once over, but as the Anderson's had said, there were no signs of forced entry. If this was another case of Hawkins' residents leaving their damn front doors unlocked only to get burgled, Steve was sure Hopper was going to have an aneurysm.

Steve was the first new addition to the Hawkins police force since Hopper himself had joined ten years earlier. The fresh face was turning some heads around town, and Hopper wasn't surprised - Steve was a handsome young man, and the blue uniform shirt and usually unflattering slacks looked uncharacteristically good on him. Besides his good looks, he'd brought a fresh mind to the force - Hopper couldn't describe how much he appreciated it.

"Hey kiddo," he said, after a few moments of silence. "What do you think about you leading this one? You'd have Powell and Callahan at your disposal, of course."

Steve almost looked dumbfounded at the suggestion, eyebrows knitted and confusion clear on his face.

"Lead the case?" A small laugh escaped him as he ran a hand through his hair, sitting back in his chair. "You're kidding me right? I don't think Mrs.Anderson would appreciate a newby taking over. Not after that performance back there."

Not to mention how unsure he was that the others in the office would even take his lead seriously. He got on with them well enough, sure, but his age put him at a severe disadvantage when they got into debates in the office.

"Of course I'm not kidding. I don't know what you're talking about," Hopper said. "You did great back there"

Steve shook his head, laughing weakly and leaning on the window to avoid looking the Chief in the eye. "Sure, whatever. I was a fumbling mess."

It was a big leap, from follower to leader - but if anyone could be a leader, Hopper believed it was Steve. He'd told him as much when they'd gone out drinking to celebrate passing his probation. Hopper had exaggerated greatly, said that maybe he'd even be the next chief some day when Hopper finally retired, or expired, whichever came sooner. Powell and Callahan weren't even in the running.

"You're gonna have to do it some day Harrington," Jim said fondly. "I'm with you every step of the way. And if you feel like you need to step down, I will leave that as an option. Now where do you think we should start?"

Steve took a deep breath and nodded in agreement, knowing there was no way of backing out of something once Hopper had made a decision. He mulled over their options, coming to what he thought was a reasonable conclusion. "The pawn shops, just in case."

A week passed and the Anderson case had only one solid suspect. Penny and Harold Anderson's son Joseph lived shortly out of town, worked on one of the vegetable farms. He had a history of debt to his name, and had fallen out with his parents over missed mortgage payments some years earlier. It seemed like an open and closed case, or at least that's what Powell was insisting after interviewing the man a second time. He had no alibi, and a neighbour had even claimed to have seen him snooping around their street whilst Penny and Harold were away.

The other officers had taken well to Steve leading the case, just as encouraging as Hopper, although a lot quicker to tease. Powell had been on the force longer than any of them and he'd mocked Steve for being so meticulous over the little details when the conclusion of the case seemed so obvious. Callahan was more disinterested than anything; he seemed to feel that way over anything that looked even remotely like real work. He'd been happy for Steve to take the lead for the first half of the week, offering tidbits of advice when he was stuck, but less so from the day Steve started giving orders. He'd sent Callahan reluctantly scouring pawn shops outside of town, looking for anything that could have come from the

Anderson's missing collection.

They'd found nothing. The only conclusion they'd reached was that Joseph Anderson had to be hiding the stolen jewels somewhere until the heat was off him.

It was Tuesday, exactly seven days since the burglary had first been called in. They were back outside the Anderson's home on a hunch. One of Steve's hunches. Hopper had encouraged him to follow his instincts, and even if this one was a little unusual, he was going to back him up. If Harrington was wrong, they'd treat it as experience.

The look on Penny Anderson's face had haunted him since the first time they'd spoken to her. They were waiting on a warrant to search Joseph's house for the stolen goods, but Steve couldn't shake the feeling they wouldn't find them there.

"Alright kiddo, go ahead and knock," Hopper said. "You better be right about this."

"I know. I am." He sounded more confident than he felt. "You just... keep them talking, alright?"

It was a working theory with nothing to back it up, but Steve was leaving no stone unturned. When Hopper had them talking, going over the details in a slow and boring manner, Steve excused himself to the bathroom and skipped upstairs as quietly as he could.

He didn't have long to search - but the Anderson's weren't as smart as he'd given them credit for.

He found the jewels in almost plain sight, stashed haphazardly inside a drawer.

Mr. Anderson didn't have much to say for himself, but Penny was insistent on blaming the banks, saying they were the real thieves. Apparently they deserved that insurance money.

They'd had less to say when Hopper asked if their son deserved to be wrongly imprisoned.

"Wouldn't have got that one without you," Hopper said later, buying Steve

a drink. "If I've learned anything this week, it's that Hawkins needs Steve Harrington. Cheers."

Hawkins, 1989

After Harrington left, Billy sat out on the lawn chair in front of the trailer for a while and smoked. The last week of his life had been turbulent to say the least. Until the knock at his door, he'd planned on staying face down in bed all day. His head was still woozy with liquor, somewhere between a little drunk and very hungover. He couldn't bear the sunlight; a pair of sunglasses sat on his face and behind them, his eyes were closed, his head swimming.

He could hear the world around him vividly, every little sound driving him insane. There was the little dog yapping around his ankles and another barking somewhere across the park. The guy at trailer 29 was arguing with his ma about his car and Tom in 31 was watching TV, probably the game, roaring in appreciation every few minutes. The TV in his own place was still on too, but he doubted Joey was still sat in front of it. The six year old had a very limited attention span, but at least he could keep himself entertained. Billy hadn't expected him to be in the house when the door went; his mother should have taken him to school, but was nowhere to be seen. After the note she'd left him the night before, part of him wondered if she'd up and left without a word.

The thought that she'd leave Joey behind was a grim one, but not much of a surprise.

He'd never wanted kids. After everything he'd been through with his own family, Billy couldn't imagine putting some kid of his own through the same shit. He wasn't cut out to be a parent, not by a long shot, and he'd sworn when the two of them had moved in with him that he'd never be Joey's father.

Not that that prevented Lori from dumping him on Billy most days, especially when Joey kicked up a fuss about going to school. The kid was trouble. Quiet, quiet trouble. He barely said a word, and Billy thought there was probably something wrong with him.

Lifting his arm to swat a fly away, Billy hissed at the pain the seared through his injured shoulder once again. The injury was going to be so fucking debilitating if it kept aching like that. He didn't want to think about the night before, shutting down the memory of it before it could even catch up with him.

What he'd seen, what he'd done... it was too much to bear. He couldn't begin to tell Harrington what had gone down; they'd call him crazy at best, lock him up for good. Billy shook his head like he could shake the thoughts away, feeling a familiar anger bubbling up inside him.

Fuck all of this. He might have done a lot of bad things in his life, but he didn't deserve this.

He had to keep telling himself that.

The phone rang, tearing him out of his thoughts. For a moment, he thought about leaving it, but the idea of Joey answering a call for him as he had the door was not on so Billy hauled himself to his feet and ran inside to grab it.

"Yeah?" He answered, stubbing his cigarette out on a dirty plate on the phone table.

"You're a fucking hard man to get hold of, Hargrove."

The stern voice at the other end of the phone sent a shiver down his spine, Billy's fingers twisting in the phone cord. He glanced back over his shoulder to where Joey was playing silently with a wooden train set on the floor.

"What do you want?" He said, lowering his voice.

"You know exactly what I want." This guy wasn't fucking around. Billy closed his eyes, a shaky breath slipping from his lips.

"Sure, you don't need to be such a piece of shit about it." The words left his mouth before he could stop himself and he cringed inwardly, knowing it was the wrong thing to say. His heart hammered in his chest, grip on the phone handset tightening.

"One week, Hargrove." The voice at the end of the phone was dripping with poison. "One week, or I'll come over to that piece of shit trailer of yours and I'll fucking kill you."

The line went dead, the lifeless dial tone shaking Billy right to his bones. One week wasn't enough fucking time.

5. Black Rain

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for how long it's been between chapters! We've just moved and the internet isn't up and running yet - but it means we've had time to write. More soon!

The Hawkins cinema was quiet, just a few people dotted around waiting for the movie to start. Steve stared up at the curtains, waiting for the lights to dim and wondering why he'd agreed to see this film. It was a distraction at least, he had reasoned with himself; for a little while he could pretend that there wasn't a murder case he needed to solve, that he hadn't seen that corpse the day before and that he didn't have a niggling sensation in the back of his head that their number one suspect didn't have anything to do with the crime.

No, think about tonight, he demanded of himself. Don't get caught up in thoughts about the case again. He was sat third row from the back of screen 2 waiting for the opening credits of *Black Rain*, a brand new crime thriller he knew next to nothing about. Dustin had been desperate to see an R rated movie since hitting 18 and Steve had agreed to go along with him. He had no idea what to expect.

The lights started to dim as the curtains drew back and Steve stretched in his seat to look around and see if he could spot his cinema partner.

"'scuse me, 'scuse me..."

Dustin's voice whispered from down the aisle as he skirted past the couple sat at the end, shimmying his way along to where Steve was sat and flopping down into it with a huge grin and arms filled with popcorn and candy. Steve sniffed in amusement, looking his long-time friend up and down judgingly.

"What..?" Dustin whispered, a little too loud for the quiet room as the movie started. "I always get hungry when I watch a movie."

With a smirk, Steve rolled his eyes, digging a hand into Dustin's

popcorn and laughing as the younger man tried to swat it away. There were few distractions better than a night out with Dustin; he never failed to distract Steve or make him feel better with his goofy grin and non-stop rambling about anything and everything that interested him. He loved to talk and Steve listened well, even if he didn't understand even half of what Dustin was saying to him.

In the eighteen or so hours since they'd been called in to the crime scene, Steve had been up to his arms in paperwork and phone calls. He'd never expected murder would need so much administration work, but he supposed it made sense. Everything had to be noted as it passed hands, chain of custody detailed and every report and witness statement had to be logged in the evidence file for the case, not to mention the press trying to get hold of anyone who was willing to give them a hint of what was going on. They'd tried to keep it under wraps and say as little as possible, but the news was already spreading.

Hopper had started a huge board of everything they knew on the situation in the Hawkins police station, although it had little on it for the time being. Powell and Callahan had been all over town chasing down next of kin, and employees of the auto shop for statements, of whom there were four. Billy, Austin who'd been on scene, another mechanic by the name of Frank Long and a receptionist called Ellie Briggs who'd been in Nancy's year at Hawkins high. Steve hadn't seen her since then but according to Callahan, she'd been a bit of a handful and probably wouldn't have been able to help even if the murder had happened right in front of her eyes.

Summed up the girls of Hawkins pretty well.

Richards didn't appear to have enemies or outstanding debts; he seemed like a regular, respectable citizen of Hawkins and that meant they were no closer to find alternative suspects to Hargrove than they had been the day before. It was stressing Steve out more than he cared to admit. All that was left for the next day or so was to wait for the autopsy reports and the forensics office in the city to come back with more evidence so they could start connecting the dots.

Dustin leant over as soon as the movie starting and muttered to him. "I still feel like I shouldn't be here. The excitement kinda goes when you're allowed to do it, right?"

The younger boy had turned 18 only a few weeks earlier. Of all the kids, they'd stayed in touch the most; Dustin had formed something like an attachment to Steve and wanted to spend time with him even as the others seemed to outgrow hanging out with their one-time babysitter.

Together they'd been through a lot, even more than what they'd experienced with the demo-dogs. After Dustin's strange and almost unsuccessful snowball in 1984, Steve had picked him up and they'd gone out for late night ice cream to console each other over their women troubles. Dustin had mentioned dancing with Nancy but seeing Steve's less than savoury reaction, they'd sworn to each other never to mention Nancy during a conversation like that again.

Since then, Steve had been Dustin's big brother as far as they were concerned. They tried to hit the movies at least once every couple of months and tonight, for the first time, because he was 18 and wanted to throw around how responsible and adult he could be, Dustin was paying.

They watched the first part of the movie in silence, right up until the main character stole from a crime scene, and then Dustin couldn't take it any more. He had to talk about it.

"That's bull," He murmured to Steve, leaning in next to him, hand scrabbling around for the dregs of his popcorn at the bottom of the bucket. "You'd never steal from a crime scene, right?"

After that, Dustin had a million things to say, opening the floodgates on his thoughts about the movie, on everything from the terrible representation of the Yakuza mafia to cheering over the firefigths, eyes shining with excitement every time he looked over to Steve, desperately searching for his approval. It was so endearing; he was sure he'd always have a soft spot for the kid.

As they walked out of the theatre, Dustin was full-on grinning.

"That made being a cop look so fucking cool," Dustin beamed, looking smug over the fact no one was going to tell him to watch his language here. "You ever get to do anything like, you'd tell me right?"

Steve had his hands dug deep into his pockets, heading back to the car.

"You know I'm not allowed to tell you about cases." He replied with a raised eyebrow, Dustin's face fell slightly. "But that doesn't mean I wouldn't tell you, of course."

The teen's face lit up again, bright eyes and a wide grin on his face towards the cop. "Fuck yeah, Steve, that's what I'm talking about."

Steve laughed as his younger friend gave him a high five. Dustin had turned out alright, for such a goofball kid.

As they reached the car, Dustin slowed, one hand tapping against his thigh.

"Something on your mind?" Steve matched his pace. With Dustin, it could be anything from girls to quantum science and beyond, so he wasn't about to start theorising what the younger man was thinking about - but the way Dustin hung his head, his perpetual trucker cap still balanced atop his perfect curls, his lips pulled tight into a frown had Steve worried.

"Do you think," Dustin said, pausing to mull over his thoughts. "Hawkins is safe?"

Steve's chest clenched slightly. It wasn't something he wanted to think about tonight, but if Dustin had questions he would always answer them. "How'd you mean?"

"The murder." Shrugging, Dustin dug his fidgety hands deep into his jean pockets. "Is it to do with the... you-know-what?"

"No." Steve answered before he could stop himself. It wasn't, couldn't

be, and he refused to think about it as an option right now. They'd been safe from the Upside Down for the last five years and nothing had changed to his knowledge. The lab wasn't even in operation anymore, not since Jane had closed the gate in '84, and there was nothing except unanswered questions that would indicate this case was anything to do with the otherworldly nightmare they'd suffered through in the past. It would all be revealed in time. "It's just... just a horrible thing that's happened, you know? Could happen anywhere."

"That's almost worse," Dustin said, dragging his feet a little. "The thought that a person in Hawkins would do that."

"Yeah," Steve said with a grimace. It kind of was.

Stopping at the car, he distracted himself fishing his keys out of his jacket pocket when Dustin suddenly perked up.

"Hey, you think I could drive us back?"

Steve burst out laughing, looking at him in bewilderment when he realised the kid was serious. "Uh, no? Not a damn chance in hell, Henderson."

"Oh come on." Dustin elbowed him playfully. "I've got my license, I need to drive something or I'll get rusty."

Contemplating it for a few moments, Steve started to raise the keys towards Dustin and then snapped them back, bouncing an eyebrow at him as he unlocked the car and slid in. "As if. I told you and your shitheads before, never again."

"Steve! That was like, five years ago." Dustin pouted as he leaned on the driver's side door so Steve couldn't close it. "And it was an emergency. You've admitted it before. It had to be done."

Prodding him in the chest until he stepped back, Steve pulled his door closed. "Get in the car, Dustin."

"Buzzkill."

Dustin was never going to hold it against him. The conversation moved on swiftly as they drove through the quiet streets, out of the town and into the suburbs where the streetlights died out and they only had Steve's headlights for light. His eyes searched the edges of the road as they passed Mirkwood out of habit and he wondered if the others suffered the same curse, looking endlessly for something they never wanted to see again around every dark corner. He knew Hopper struggled with it just as much as he did but the kids seemed better adjusted than any of them. It was probably for the best.

They talked about anything; about the gripes of being an adult, about Dustin's newest crush, about some DnD game the boys had been playing. Steve couldn't wrap his head around Dustin and the others being in their last year of school yet - it felt like he was barely out of school, despite it having been years.

"Hey," Dustin said after an uncharacteristic moment of silence. Steve glanced over at him and offered up an encouraging smile as he always did when he could tell Dustin needed to talk.

"Yeah, Henderson?"

If it was about the murder again, he wasn't sure what he would say.

"I sent off some college applications this week. My first ones... I'm gunning for an early decision."

Steve's immediate instinct was pride but there was something else in Dustin's voice, something worried. "Congratulations! Where are you thinking of heading?"

"Cornell, Brandeis... or MIT."

"MIT?" He tilted his head slightly, looking at Dustin out of the corner of his eye.

"Massachusetts Institute of Technology."

"Oh!" Steve smiled, proud of the lineup, until he saw Dustin's expression and thought about it. "Oh."

A strained silence fell over the car as he considered the three school.

Dustin was probably the smartest kid Steve had ever met, and he expected no less of him than to go to a top college to study. They'd talked before about him studying science and changing the world with his discoveries, but that was back when Dustin was too young for it to happen. It was more than Steve had ever hoped to achieve himself, and he was half-expecting to hear Harvard in the kid's lineup.

But neither Boston or New York were in Indiana. The realisation hit him like a punch in the gut.

"That far, huh?"

"Yeah..." Dustin exhaled a breath he'd clearly been holding for a while. "Mr. Clarke says I've got to go for the best I can get into, and none of those.. they're..."

"They're not in Indiana," Steve finished for him, with resigned acceptance. He gave Dustin a heartfelt smile of encouragement, pushing his hair back off his face. Dustin valued his old middle school teacher's opinion above anything, at least when it came to educational matters, and Clarke was probably right anyway - Dustin would do great things if he was given the opportunity. It was just that the opportunity was a long way from Hawkins... a long way from his friends. He took a slow breath and stared out into the darkness ahead of the car, thinking how to word how he felt about it. "I'm... really fucking proud of you, you know that?"

"It's just an application." Dustin looked visibly relieved. "There's no saying I'll get in, you know."

Steve nudged his friend playfully and smiled again, relaxing somewhat. "You will, Henderson. You will."

They pulled up outside Dustin's house without any more bombs being dropped, spending the remainder of the journey talking about the movie once again and agreeing to meet up with the rest of the gang in a few weeks time to catch the second instalment of *Back to the Future* on its first day in the cinema. As Dustin left the car, Steve felt

a wave of loneliness hit him he hadn't felt in a while. It was as though time had flown suddenly, like he'd missed years of his life and the present was slipping through his fingers. He didn't want to say goodbye to the way things had been for the last two years; they'd been his best years so far and he wasn't ready for them to be over.

Rolling down his window, he leant out of it and called after Dustin.

"What?" Dustin said, stuffing his hands in his pockets as he strolled back to the car.

"You wanna take the beamer for a spin? I was only teasing earlier, I'll let you drive her if you want."

"Are you serious?" It was Dustin's turn to look bewildered now, and Steve couldn't help but laugh at the look on his face.

"Serious as I can be. You want to?"

Dustin's eyes lit up.

"Hell yeah! But..." He glanced back at the house, then the car, then the house again. "Curfew. I've got to be back before ten and it's already gone half nine."

Steve frowned, staring out at the quiet street. "We won't be long."

"Another night maybe?" Dustin smiled apologetically. "I really want to, but mom's already worried with the news and all... I don't want to scare her any more than she already is."

He knew when his argument wasn't worth fighting. Backing down, Steve agreed they'd do it another night and waved Dustin off with a heavy disappointment hanging over him. He sat in the car outside of the Henderson's house for a few minutes after Dustin disappeared inside, his feet not willing to press on the peddles to drive home to his empty home just yet. The small clock embedded in his dashboard ticked 9:36pm; shifting the car into gear, he finally pulled away and headed up the street. Pulling up to the junction, Steve took a moment before flicking his indicator on and turning the opposite way from home.

Mornings were for coffee and contemplation... but evenings were for drinking. Hopper was a frequent patron to the Roadhouse bar, where he'd taken Steve there when he'd turned twenty one and was able to have his first legal drink. If Steve ever needed to find the officer after hours, the bar was a good enough bet now that Jane was old enough to stay out with her friends. He hoped he might find him there tonight.

The drive was quiet, the town almost feeling like a ghost town as he passed back through towards the Roadhouse. The news of the murder had spread like wildfire and without a proper lead, many of the residents had taken it upon themselves to stay indoors after hours. Only a few of the younger townsfolk seemed to still be out and about. Pulling into the Roadhouse parking lot, his brown eyes swept across the empty spaces. There was but no Sheriff's car, but his eyes fell once again on a familiar blue Camaro.

Well, damn. Twice in as many days.

He stopped in one of the spaces. It was almost 10pm now and if he went home it wouldn't be the end of the world... but the lonely pang tugged at his chest, his hand unbuckling his seat belt and opening the door for him without much interaction with his conscious thoughts.

The inside of the Roadhouse was quieter than he'd ever seen it, only a few patrons dotted about here and there, mostly in small groups apart from the blonde at the bar itself. It was a cosy, friendly looking place with wood panelled walls and various rock and roll memorabilia hanging above the bar, an old jukebox in a far corner and a number of tables and booths dotted around. There was enough space for dancing, although people rarely did, and a number of worn barstools where Steve liked to sit. The whole place smelt of cigarette smoke and joss sticks, and it felt warm and familiar in the low light.

Billy Hargrove was sat alone at the far end of the bar, both hands curled around a beer that had hardly been drunk. It'd been less than forty-eight hours since the discovery of Richards' body at the auto shop, but seeing as the news was spreading so fast, it wasn't surprising that the rumours were too. Plenty of people had seen him

receive a visit from the cops the day before; even across the room Steve could see eyes on Billy and the other patrons seemed to be giving him a wide berth. The bar was clear at his end, as were the nearby tables. Billy didn't look like he cared.

"Evenin' Stevie, you havin' your usual?"

Myrtle Figg was calling him from behind the bar. She was a stocky woman in her late 50's, grey hair tightly curled to her head and face mottled and creased with laugh lines, her and her husband had built the bar themselves some 30 years ago and after he'd died she had kept everything afloat. The young man had grown fond of Myrtle since Hopper had started bringing him here and she had grown fond of him in turn.

"Evening, Mrs. Figg." Steve replied as he crossed towards her, pulling himself up onto one of the old stools. "I'd like a whiskey tonight, please."

Not his usual, but after Hopper had introduced him to the drink, Steve found that he enjoyed it a lot more than beer. On nights when he felt like this, it gave him a comfort he couldn't explain.

Rolling her eyes, Myrtle reached for the bottle she knew both the officers enjoyed and poured Steve a glass.

"How many times I gotta tell you..." Placing the glass in front of him with a pointed look. "Y'can just call me Myrtle."

Returning the smile to her, he raised the glass in toast. "At least one more time."

She laughed, heading off down the bar to another patron who had appeared. He lowered his hand, taking a sip of the alcohol and closing his eyes to enjoy the burn. So much for not feeling lonely here - the sensation seemed only to hit him harder as he sat there quietly. He contemplated leaving, contemplating his other options too - there were a few loose women around his age, or at least not too much older, lingering in the bar that he could hit on, but it felt pointless. He didn't want to take any of them home with him; it was too much trouble in the morning. Leaving already felt like admitting

defeat, accepting that he was growing old and miserable before his time; he hoped Hopper might show up but even after only a few minutes, he was willing to accept the Sheriff was probably too busy on the case.

One drink. One drink and then he'd go, he thought, sipping slowly at it even as he thought that just to drag out the time before he left and went home to his empty house.

"Fancy seeing you here, Harrington."

The cocky voice cut through the silence and the ringing in his ears, and Steve turned to find himself eye to eye with Billy Hargrove.

"Twice in two days," Billy continued. "Anyone would think you were dying to spend time with me."